

VZCZCXYZ0014  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSK #0341/01 0871308  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 281308Z MAR 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4123  
INFO RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS 3625  
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 3281  
RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KIEV 3222  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3403  
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 1631  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1040  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RHMFISI/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS MINSK 000341

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BO

SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly XIV (March 18-March 24)

¶1. This is the fourteenth in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19 presidential elections.

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Election Results  
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#### ¶2. CEC Gives Final Results

On March 23, CEC Head Lidiya Yermoshina described Lukashenko's election campaign as "brilliant" after announcing that the president won 83 percent of the vote. Milinkevich received only 6.1 percent of the votes, followed by Gaidukevich and Kozulin, who received 3.5 and 2.2 respectively. According to Yermoshina, approximately 5.5 million people voted for Lukashenko, which is 800,000 more than in 2001. Ninety-three percent of registered voters, or 6,614,998 people, voted in this year's elections. Yermoshina linked the high turnout to "vigorous propaganda" against the GOB and the people's "robust" response.

#### ¶3. Prosecutor Says Elections Democratic

The Prosecutor General's Office on March 21 announced that the March 19 presidential elections were democratic and conducted on "the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage." The Prosecutor General's Office claimed to have received 300 complaints of electoral law abuses during the signature campaign including the "illegal" distribution of campaign materials. Police seized over 1,200 "illegally" printed newspapers and pamphlets. Prosecutors brought misdemeanor charges against 25 people for electoral law violations and opened a criminal case into alleged forged signatures supporting Kozulin.

#### ¶4. Russian Party Leader Questions Official Election Results

At a March 20 news conference in Minsk, Leader of Russia's Liberal Union of Right Forces (SPS) Nikita Belykh contested the official Belarusian presidential election results. According to Belykh, at polling station number 20, only 726 ballots were distributed, but 759 people still managed to vote. Deputy Chairman of the United Civic Party Aleksandr Dobrovolsky said that a member of the election commission at polling station 20 insisted he had counted 208 votes for Milinkevich, but the official tally resulted in only 150 votes for the independent candidate. Independent observation coordinator Vladimir Sekerko told independent news source Belapan that at nine polling stations in Gomel, 2,472 people allegedly voted.

However, when the results were announced, 149 extra votes appeared.

#### 15. CIS Declares Elections Free and Transparent

On March 20, CIS observation mission head Vladimir Rushailo declared Belarus' presidential elections were "free, open, and transparent." Rushailo reported several minor flaws in the election, particularly polling booths that were too narrow and voters in a few districts had the wrong addresses of polling stations. Rushailo also complained that poll workers had refused to provide information about the number of people who had voted early. However, Rushailo said the election went smoothly despite "unprecedented external pressure," such as "biased" statements, harsh opinions, and warnings about political and economic sanctions.

#### 16. Russian MP Slams Election Results

Russia's liberal MP Vladimir Ryzhkov on March 19 called Belarus' early voting process "strange" and claimed no country in the world had 25 - 30 percent turnouts during early voting. Ryzhkov called the process "dubious" because it provided opportunities for ballot stuffing and forcing people to vote for a particular candidate. Later on March 20, Ryzhkov slammed the elections as undemocratic and illegitimate and lashed out at authorities for arresting Lukashenko opponents.

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Exit Polls  
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17. Russia Polling Service Denies Exit Polls In Belarus  
On March 20, Russian polling service Levada denied conducting exit polls during Belarus' presidential elections. According to a Levada spokesperson, Levada unsuccessfully applied for accreditation to conduct exit polls and tried to conduct a telephone survey, but failed as many respondents refused to reply. Levada's statement came after Milinkevich campaign manager Sergei Kalyakin told a crowd of supporters at October Square on March 19 that according to Levada's exit polls, Lukashenko had 47 percent of the vote and Milinkevich had 30 percent.

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Congratulations  
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#### 18. Putin Congratulates Lukashenko

Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 20 sent a telegram of congratulations to Lukashenko. "The outcome of the election testifies to the confidence of voters in the policy that you are implementing to ensure the further rise in the Belarusian people's well-being....I am convinced that thanks to joint efforts, we will manage to really advance on the path of the formation of the Union State and ensure the irreversible development of our countries." Lukashenko also received congratulations from Fidel Castro, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, and former president of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akayev.

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Repression and Harassment  
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#### 19. Ukrainian Youth Deported

Seven members of the Ukrainian youth movement National Alliance on March 20 were deported. The activists were arrested on March 19 after the October Square rally.

#### 10. Websites Blocked

According to independent news source Belapan, authorities on March 19 used a process called traffic shaping to block access to several Belarusian websites. Traffic shaping is a procedure to reduce volume traffic and cannot be easily countered. Authorities denied the claims and said the websites' problems

were due to too many users on the system at once.

#### ¶11. Customs Seize Money From Activists

On March 21, custom officers seized USD 1,000 from two opposition activists as they were traveling from Ukraine to Belarus. Svyatoslav Shalamov from Gomel and Aleksei Kupreyev from Mogilev were held for four hours at the border crossing while custom officers examined their passports and searched their possessions without providing an explanation. The officers seized USD 400 from Kupreyev and USD 700 from Shalamov on the grounds that the money was counterfeit. Shalamov plans to file a complaint. The activists observed the 2004 Parliamentary elections and referendum as members of the unregistered group Partnership.

#### ¶12. Vyachorka Released From Jail

On March 23, authorities released leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and senior Milinkevich campaign member Vintsuk Vyachorka from jail after serving a 15-day sentence for organizing and participating in a March 8 Milinkevich meeting with voters. Relatives, reporters, and opposition supporters met Vyachorka when he was released from the Okrestina detention center. According to the released politician, 200 opposition activists were being held in the jail.

#### ¶13. Senior Deputy of Milinkevich Campaign Team Beaten

On March 23, deputy chief of Milinkevich's campaign team Viktor Korniyenko informed reporters that he was severely beaten by two unidentified men near his home. According to a Milinkevich spokesperson, two "sturdy" men knocked Korniyenko to the ground and kicked him repeatedly and beat him with a stick until he lost consciousness. The spokesperson linked the attack to Korniyenko's political activities.

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Quote of the Week  
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#### ¶14. CEC Head Yermoshina on opposition candidates after they refused to recognize the official election results and gathered on October Square:

"It is necessary to lose decently, especially for men...law-enforcement agencies performed admirably and demonstration participants were dispersed by nature, snow, and the lack of an idea and strong leaders."

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